



Just a little prick!

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Just recently I decided to do the right thing and select a GP from amongst my colleagues. He took a detailed history and decided that I was at risk of all sorts of dread diseases that could begin to affect a sixty year old elderly male. He weighed me and muttered about my BMI being in its mid thirties. My blood pressure was 110/80-mm not bad. This is not going to hurt a bit, he said, as he examined me in a prostrate position and pronounced it smooth and small, which was more than could be said for his index finger. I couldn't argue with his conclusions that I should lose 'a little' weight and that I should think about having a colonoscopy because of my brother's diagnosis of rectal carcinoma. Finally he handed me a form and said that I should take it to the lab at the local hospital for fasting lipids and other bloods.

I arrived at the lab a week later just before nine and rather cranky after the fast. There was a nurse in uniform behind the desk but she hurriedly informed me that she didn't work there and told me to sit in line with the other patients. As I sat there I read the notice which said 'Dear Outpatient, Please wait here (indefinitely?) and you will be attended to.' About 15 minutes later a pleasant young lady arrived and asked who was first. I asked how long

this would all take and she signalled to the waiting multitude and asked how long I had been waiting. Fifteen minutes obviously sounded not bad as she did not comment. The other silent sufferers sat facing the front and said not a word. About twenty minutes later I was summoned into the inner room and asked to produce my Medicare card. When I said I didn't have one she put me in the too hard basket and said she would have to speak to her boss.

The boss came in all apologetic and told me I'd have to pay. When I asked how much he said it would cost 'a fortune', and when pressed said about \$60. He looked surprised when I said that was OK, anything to get the process over. I had a look down the list and decided not to have the fasting lipids and the alkaline phosphatase done and that brought the price down to \$30. After a few minutes the blood was in the tubes and I was on my way to the front desk, which by this time

was manned by a pleasant young lady.

'Can you send me a bill?' I asked realising I had no cash. 'Oh no, we can't do that, you'd never pay.' Promising faithfully to return after visiting the bank, I was on my way only 55 minutes after my initial entry. I had always thought that the bank was the slowest institution in Australia

before this, but it seemed very efficient as I transferred my money and withdrew the cash.

Returning to the lab I proffered my \$50 note only to be looked at in horror. They had no change because it might be stolen. Her suggestion to me was to go and buy something in the cafeteria next door and return with the correct money. Eventually I escaped and live to tell this tedious little tale.

So what did I learn this morning about screening for disease and Australian medicine?

1. If you are a Kiwi in Aussie, get a Medicare card before you need to check your bloods.
2. If you really need medical care go to the hospital. But the best way of going there is to heed the instructions of the famous Glasgow comedian Chic Murray: 'Throw yourself in front of that bus, you'll be there soon enough.'
3. Why do medical professionals from phlebotomists down, or up, feel happier if they can depersonalise everyone to a numbered card? Everyone seemed powerless because the computer wouldn't accept anything else.
4. Just how much of our failure to get the general population interested in screening is due to the fact that the mechanisms we use to get the results are just too difficult to use? Blood taking seemed simple enough but collecting faeces and having a colonoscopy? Forget it!

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